

Synagogue of Beracha Veshalom Vegemiluth Hasidim
(Blessing and Peace and Acts of Piety)
Krystal Gade 16A and B
Charlotte Amalie
St. Thomas
Virgin Islands

HABS No. VI-10

ADDENDUM
FOLLOWS...

HABS
VI
3-CHAM,
3-

PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Eastern Office, Design and Construction
143 South Third Street
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

SYNAGOGUE OF BERACHA VESHALOM VEGEMILUTH HASIDIM

(Blessing and Peace and Acts of Piety) HABS No. VI-10

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VI
3-CHAM,
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Address: Krystal Gade 16A and B, Charlotte Amalie, St. Thomas,
Virgin Islands

Present Owners
and Occupants: The Congregation of Blessing and Peace and Acts
of Piety.

Present Use: Synagogue.

Statement of
Significance: This synagogue, a well-preserved structure, built
in 1833, is among the most interesting buildings
on St. Thomas.

ADDENDUM
FOLLOWS ...

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History

1. Original and subsequent owners: Built by the St. Thomas Jewish Congregation and continuously owned by them.
2. Date of erection: Built 1833; consecrated 12 September 1833. The following account of the consecration of the synagogue appeared in the Sanct Thomae Tidende for 14 September 1833 (on microfilm at the St. Thomas Public Library):

"We are happy in having it in our power to congratulate our friends of the Hebrew religion on the early completion of the New Synagogue. About six o'clock on Thursday evening, the Congregation assembled in their temporary place of worship, and shortly after they proceeded to the New Synagogue in the usual ceremonial order.

"At 7, His Excellency the Governor, and many respectable persons entered the Building, and immediately after the Consecration Service commenced: - The Lamp for the Perpetual Light borne by the eldest Member of the Congregation, followed by six sacred Rolls of the Pentateuch carried by Members, appeared at the entrance, which the elder Priest received and lighted the Lamp, pronouncing the Benediction, and it was then handed to a younger Priest, who placed it in the stand appropriated for it.

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"During the performance of these offices, the Reader returned thanks for being permitted for the first time to witness this solemn and impressive ceremony - the choir, consisting of young ladies and gentlemen, sang the 24th verse of the 118th Psalm.

"The Reader then accompanied by the Rulers received the sacred Rolls, the choir singing the 26, 27, 28, and 29th verses of the 118th Psalm, while the same were introduced by a circuitous route to the Reader's desk. - After which, commenced the Prayer for Our Beloved Sovereign and the Royal Family, as also for their Excellencies the Governor-General, the Governor, and all the other Magistrates - the same was also implored for all the Congregation present. The choristers then sang the 10th verse of the 146 and the 29th Psalm - during which the Rolls of the Pentateuch were deposited in the Ark. The Reader then returned to his Desk, and the choir singing from the 21st to the 29th verse of the 118th Psalm.

"An excellent discourse taken from 1st of Kings, chap. 8, verse 13, written expressly for the occasion by Mr. Isaac Lindo, was most emphatically delivered by that gentleman, which made the Congregation deeply impressed with the most pathetic feelings of reverence and devotion.

"Offerings were afterwards made, in which the liberality of the assembly was apparent.

"The Service of the Consecration was terminated by the choir chanting a Hymn for the occasion. In concluding our account of this memorable ceremony, it is only doing justice to say, the whole of which was conducted in a manner worthy a people who were the first worshippers of the 'true and living GOD.'"

3. Original construction: A list of subscribers to the building fund for the synagogue was published in the Sanct Thomae Tidende 30 March and 6 April 1833. \$3476 was subscribed as well as substantial contributions in

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building materials and labor. Subscribers included not only members of the congregation, but also many others from the island and abroad.

B. Historical Events Connected with the Structure:

Jews, along with Roman Catholics, were expressly tolerated by the Government of the Danish West Indies as early as 1685, but were required to hold only private services. Lutherans and Calvinists were granted full freedom to exercise their rites and practices, and the Lutheran church was the established state church. Although one of the 17th century governors, Gabriel Milan, was Jewish, there does not appear to have been a Jewish community in the West Indies until the end of the 18th century. On his visit to the Moravian Missions in 1777, C. G. A. Oldendorp recorded noting a number of Jews in the Danish West Indies, especially on St. Croix. In 1781 the British, under Admiral Rodney, sacked the Dutch island of St. Eustatius where there was a Dutch Congregation that had erected a synagogue in 1738. With the disruption of commerce and shipping, the St. Eustatius Jews, mostly skippers and merchants, began moving; many settling in St. Thomas. By 1789 there were nine Jewish families on St. Thomas and they built their first synagogue in 1796. This building burned in the great fire of 22 November 1804. In 1812 a new synagogue was built which was replaced by a larger one in 1823. This building burned in 1831 and was replaced by the present building two years later.

Denmark, a leader in religious toleration, passed laws in 1814 for the further protection and liberation of the Jews, and in 1835 granted permission for intermarriage with gentiles. The St. Thomas community continued to grow with about 400 Jews counted in 1837 and about 500 in 1850. Then, with the sustained decline of business activity that began about the middle of the nineteenth century, the Jewish population declined until the community had almost disappeared by World War II. Since then the Jewish community has increased, sharing the general increase of population and prosperity.

The congregation operates under a code of Laws sanctioned by the Danish government in 1848, and follows Sephardic rites and traditions.

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C. Sources of Information:
Unpublished sources:

A dimensioned plan of the church dated November 1836 is included in the Map of Charlotte Amalie, prepared, drawn, and annotated by Frederick Christian Peter Hingelberg, 1833-37. Photocopies at the St. Thomas Public Library, and the Virgin Islands National Park Headquarters, St. Thomas.

It is the opinion of Miss Enid M. Baa, Chief, Bureau of Libraries and Museums, St. Thomas, who has worked with the records of the congregation, that early records that might shed light on the erection of this building do not survive. On vital statistics in records of the congregation, see: Baa, Enid M., "The Preservation of the Sephardic Records of the Island of St. Thomas, Virgin Islands," Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society, Vol. XLIV (December 1954), pp. 114-19.

Published sources:

Bieber, Hugo, "Virgin Islands," The Universal Jewish Encyclopedia.

Campbell, Albert A., "Note on the Jewish Community of St. Thomas, U. S. Virgin Islands," Jewish Social Studies, Vol. IV (April 1942), pp. 161-66.

Code of Laws for the Government of the Israelite Congregation in the Island of St. Thomas, prepared by Royal Commission, sanctioned by Frederick VII, 17 February, 1848 (Philadelphia, 1848).

Hvass, Tyge, Dansk Vestindien, Vol. VI of Aeldre Nordisk Architektur, Mogens Clemmensen, editor (Copenhagen: C. A. Reitzel, 1925), p. 10.

Knox, John P., A Historical Account of St. Thomas, W. I. (New York: Charles Scribner, 1852, Reprint 1922), p. 161.

Larsen, Jens, Virgin Islands Story (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1950), p. 147, 152.

Larsen, Kay, Guvernører, Residenter, Kommandanter og Chefer, Samt Enkelte Andre Fremtraedende personer i de Danske Trop-ekolonier (Copenhagen: Arthur Jensens Forlag, 1940), p. 236.

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Paiewonsky, Isidor, Jewish Historical Developments in the Virgin Islands, 1665-1959 (St. Thomas, 1959).

Westergaard, Waldemar, The Danish West Indies Under Company Rule (1671-1754) with a Supplementary Chapter, 1755-1917 (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1917), p. 76

Prepared by Osmund R. Overby, Architect
National Park Service
August 1965

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement

1. Architectural interest and merit: This small synagogue, a well-preserved structure built in 1833, is architecturally among the most interesting building on St. Thomas.
2. Condition of fabric: Fair; some plaster and paint spalling.

B. Description of Exterior

1. Number of stories, bays; over-all dimensions; layout-shape: One story, three-bay front: approximately 40' x 50'; rectangular shape.
2. Foundations: Masonry with lime mortar and plaster.
3. Wall construction: Brick and cut stone load-bearing masonry walls with lime mortar and plaster.
4. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors: One door each on north (rear) and south (front) sides. South (main) door interior wooden shutters only. Diagonal plank outside and vertical plank inside. North door exterior shutters only; wooden, vertical plank outside and three-panel frame inside. Pointed arches approximately equilateral.
 - b. Windows: One window on each side of doors. Four windows on east and west (side) walls. On north, east, and south walls, windows have exterior wooden shutters; five or six irregular wooden frame panels inside (except south window on east wall which has

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diagonal plank inside) and exterior vertical or diagonal plank. Interior jalousie shutters two-panel adjustable louvers except on north and south walls, where they are four panels folding in middle of each leaf. Above all interior shutters is tympanum of two-panel fixed wooden frames with fixed louvers. West wall four windows have interior wooden double folding shutters with five irregular panels. No exterior shutters as wall is inches from retaining wall on next property.

All window openings splayed at top from equilateral pointed arch at outer surface to segmental (probably structural) arch on interior wall surface.

All windows have surrounds on exterior with further projecting sill, except at rear (north wall).

5. Roof:

- a. Shape, covering: Hipped roof with a very short ridge; wooden frame; corrugated metal covering painted red.
- b. Cornice: Molded cornice with parapet above, hiding much of the roof. No eaves. Downspouts through the parapet to oil drum southwest corner and to neighbor's cistern via their eaves northeast corner.
- c. Dormer: One barrel vaulted dormer on west slope of roof with wooden shutter or door for access to roof.
- d. Chimneys: None.

C. Description of Interior

- 1. Floor plans: Square main floor area with masonry platform, three risers high at north and south sides and two risers high across part of the west side. Wooden platform one riser high atop the masonry. Platforms on north and south take up the increase in that dimension over east-west.

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Two masonry risers up to bema on east. Interior Ionic plastered columns at inside of each corner of main floor area. Set on high pedestals.

Pulpit and reader's platform on axis to west. High solid wooden paneled railing at first riser of periphery platform. All woodwork including benches is of mahogany.

2. Stairways: None.
3. Flooring: Marble tiles about 13" square. Main square floor area covered with about 1" of loose sand.
4. Wall and ceiling finish: Lime plaster painted white.
5. Ceiling: Flat around periphery from walls to interior columns. Over square main floor area is a quadripartite vault. All plastered.
6. Trim: Elaborate architrave, frieze with "dot-dash" motif, and cornice at base of quadripartite vault. Rope molding in arrises of vault. Boss design of Star of David. All in plaster. Mahogany doors of bema flanked by columns on pedestals painted to simulate marble. They support scrolled pediment with tablets and crown above.
7. Hardware: Wrought iron shutter brackets, pintles, strap hinges, and latch bars. Same on interior of outside shutters.
Inside: Four large polished brass candlesticks with electric lights and eight brass finials.
8. Lighting: Large center chandelier and four side ones with candles and one ceremonial chandelier with large candle in front of bema. Two electric fixtures with double brackets on interior of columns.
9. Heating: No facilities.

D. Site

1. General setting and orientation: Freestanding building part way up Krystal Gade on Synagogue Hill overlooking Charlotte Amalie harbor. Retaining wall, on property immediately west, up almost to cornice just a few inches from west wall. East wall overlooks roof of residence to east.

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2. Enclosures: Wrought iron fence and gate across parts of front and east side. High masonry retaining wall around terrace to rear (north).
3. Outbuildings: Small freestanding storage building (sacristy) on southwest corner next to gate and on Krystal Gade. Brick with plaster. Pointed arch openings with typical shutters.
4. Walks: Terrace to rear, of natural stone in cement mortar. Area around portico and portico floor paved with concrete with incised square pattern. Steps are of square marble tiles.
5. Landscaping: None.

Prepared by Frederik C. Gjessing, Architect
National Park Service
April 1959

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